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ABSTRACT

In his article "Contraction, Deletion, and Inherent Variability of the English Copula" ("Language," 1969, William Labov asserts that the affinities of Black English (BE) with Standard English (SE) are evidenced by the fact that BE copula deletion occurs in those positions where SE copula contraction may occur. This paper examines the conclusions reached by other scholars that BE's affinities are more with Creole languages than with SE, and considers the copula in several Creoles (West African Pidgin, Gullah, and Haitian Creole) in order to determine the extent to which copula absence can be taken as evidence of the Creole nature of BE. The author finds evidence to support both sides of the argument, nor does he find the two positions incompatible. He concludes, however, after an examination of Hebrew, a copula-less language unrelated to the other languages in question, that the copula positions examined by Labov (past tense, clause final, and following a verb or auxiliary) "have some sort of inter-language importance to copulas in that funny things happen in these positions," and sees this fact as limiting the extent to which comparative studies of the copula in Creole languages can support or weaken either side of the argument. (FWB)

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CREOLES AND COPULAS¹

Paper to be delivered at Creole Symposium at the
Fall meeting of the American Anthropological Association
in San Diego, California

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In his important article, "Contraction, Deletion, and Inherent Variability of the English Copula," William Labov notes that the copula in Black English (Labov's Negro Non Standard) may be deleted, with a list class of exceptions, in just those positions where the copula may be contracted in Standard English; that is, everywhere but in the past tense, in clause final position, and immediately following another verb or auxiliary. Thus:

(1) John a teacher.

but

(2) John was a teacher.

(3) I know what John is.

(4) John may be a teacher.

(5) John wants to be a teacher.

From these facts Labov is able to treat copula deletion as an extension of Standard English copula contraction.

Labov's argument seems unassailable as long as consideration is limited to Standard English and Black English. However, there is a sizeable body of opinion which holds that Black English's affinities are more with Creole languages than with Standard English.² In this paper I will consider the copula in several Creoles in an attempt to determine the extent to which copula absence can be taken as evidence of the Creole nature of Black English. To this end I will especially

consider the forms of the copula in two of the positions where Labov found an explicit copula; clause finally and following an auxiliary or another verb.³ For brevity's sake I will term these "Labov positions."

West African Pidgin uses a distressingly large number of forms where Standard English uses the copula. With predicate nominatives it uses [bi]⁴

(6) *yan, i bi tičə* ⁵ 'John is a teacher.'

with locatives and progressives it uses []⁶

(7) *yan de fə akra* 'John is in Accra.'

(8) *yan de siŋ* 'John is singing.'

while with predicate adjectives there is no explicit copula.

(9) *yan tɔl* 'John is tall.'

However, these disparate copulas fall together, as least somewhat, in the positions Labov considered. Thus:

(10) *yan go bi tičə* 'John will be a teacher.'

(11) *yan go bi fe gana* 'John will be in Ghana.'

(12) *yan go bi glæd* 'John will be happy.'

(13) *yan no klEvə layk i tink i bi* 'John is not as smart as he thinks he is.'

even though there also exist sentences like

(14) *yan no de fe gana layk i tink i de* 'John is not in Ghana like she thinks he is.'

and

(15) *i want de fe gana* 'He prefers to be in Ghana.'

the basic situation seems to be that the single form [bi] in the Labov positions alternates with a variety of forms in other positions. Considering the situation as a problem of synchronic West African Pidgin syntax I can find no non-ad hoc explanation for these facts. Considering West African Pidgin in the light of Black English there is a seductive parallelism.. Both have a form of the copula 'be' which appears in Labov positions, alternating with other elements in other positions. Obviously the parallelism is far from complete, but it is close enough to be suggestive.

Although the morphemes involved differ a bit (principally in the use of [bɔ] instead of [bi] when followed by a Noun-phrase) the pattern of alternation in Old-fashioned Rural Gullah⁷ is essentially identical with that of West African Pidgin. I therefore will only note that everything I asserted about West African Pidgin seems to hold for Gullah.

A different situation holds for Haitian Creole.⁸ In most sentences there is no copula

(16) *ʒɑ se profɛsɔ̃* 'John is a teacher.'

(17) *ʒɑ ʁo* 'John is tall.'

(18) *ʒɑ pɔʁto pʁĩs* 'John is in Port-au-Prince.'

while in clause final position, the copula [ye] (French est) appears just as 'be' does in Black English.

(19) *ʒɑ pa pi ɡrɔ̃ kɔ̃*
mari kwel ye
as Mary believes he is.'

'John is not as big

(20) *mwɑ kanɛ̃ kote*
ʒɑ ye

"I know where John is.'

- Zã pa profesã Kõ
 (21) mãri kwel ye 'John is not a
 professor as Mary believes he is.'

although [ye] does not appear after other verbs

- Zã a grã lãl a
 (22) gẽn diz ã 'John will be big when
 he is ten years old.'
- Zã a profesã lãl
 (23) fini klas li 'John will be a
 teacher when he finishes his class.'

A possible explanation for these facts may be found in two features of Haitian Creole discussed by Goodman (1964). First, Goodman notes (p. 60) that there is a short list class of Haitian Creole verbs, exemplified by vini, which retain their final vowel only in clause or sentence final position. Second, Goodman (p. 59) states that a semivowel is regularly inserted initially in monosyllabic words beginning with a vowel and that this is the origin of the [y] or [ye]. Now if [ye] is a member of the vini class of verbs and if the rule inserting the semivowel follows the rule deleting the final vowel of this class of verbs then the observed distribution of [ye] is accounted for by independently motivated phonological rules.

At this point there is something for everybody; believers in the Creole affinities of Black English can point to the strong similarities in copula distribution between Black English and Haitian Creole and the phonological nature of copula deletion in each language, while unbelievers can point to the completely different phonological rules used in each language.

Before drawing my own conclusions, I would like to consider another copulaless language,¹⁰ Hebrew, which is clearly unrelated to any of the other languages I have discussed. The situation is strangely

familiar. There are no copulas in simple declarative sentences

- hā'is gādōl
(24) the man big 'The man is big.'
hā'is hū' mōreh
(25) the man he teacher 'The man is a teacher.'

but a copula appears after verbs

- hā'is rōseh lihyōt gādōl
(26) the man wants to be big 'The man wants to be big.'
hā'is rōseh lihyōt mōreh
(27) the man wants to be teacher 'The man wants to be a teacher.'

I could elicit no sentences with the copula in final position but this is probably due to the fact that Hebrew is a VSO language.

The Hebrew sentences feed a growing suspicion that Labov positions have a language independent importance for copula deletion or insertion. A second point which I will just mention is the use of a repeated noun-phrase as the subject of equative sentences, though not with predicate adjectives. Although neither

- hā'is hū' gādōl
(28) the man he big 'The man is big.'

nor

- hā'is mōreh
(29) the man teacher 'The man is a teacher.'

is wholly ungrammatical, speakers of Hebrew show a definite tendency to prefer (24) and (25) to (28) and (29). This correlates interestingly with Haitian Creole where (16) and (17) are possible (reproduced here for convenience)

- (16) Žā se profesā 'John is a professor.'

(17) ^yzã ro 'John is tall.'

but (30) and (31) are ungrammatical.

(30)*zã profesä

(31)*zã se ro

From all of the above I would like to suggest the following, timid, conclusions.

- I. What I have referred to as Labov positions, clause final and following a verb or an auxiliary, have some sort of inter-language importance to copulas in that funny things happen to copulas in these positions.
- II. Because of I, Labov's findings lose some force as an argument against the Creole nature of Black English; (it should be noted that this is not an argument made by Labov.) i.e., since funny things happen to copulas in Labov positions it is not too wild a coincidence that Black English cannot delete in these positions and Standard English cannot contract in them.
- III. Similarly some force is removed from arguments for Creole affinities of Black English based on the similarity between Haitian Creole and Black English use of the copula.
- IV. Labov (1969) describes Black English use of the copula in terms of a sociolinguistic system including Standard English. Stewart (1969) shows how the present use of the copula in Black English developed from a Creole system. These positions are not incompatible. More sadly, conclusion I seems to minimize the extent to which comparative studies of the copula in Creole languages can support or weaken either Stewart's or Labov's position.

NOTES

- 1) In preparing this paper, I have benefitted from discussions with R.M.R. and B.L. Hall, Bill Stewart, Walt Wolfram, Ed Fasold, Roger Shuy, and Beryl Bailey.
- 2) See for instance Dillard (undated) and Stewart (1969).
- 3) Ferguson (1968:3) states that languages without copulas in the present tense generally have them in other tenses. I believe this is true if Ferguson means inflected tenses and thus I haven't considered past tense situations.
- 4) The West African Pidgin sentences were supplied by Professor Kofi Awoonor.
- 5) For sentences in West African Pidgin I use a rough phonetic transcription.
- 6) In certain dialects of West African Pidgin [be] is used only for locatives while [di] is used for progressives.
- 7) I am indebted to William Stewart for this term as well as for the data on which my conclusions are based.
- 8) The Haitian Creole sentences discussed here were collected by Mike and Beatrice Hall.
- 9) [se] is, at least stymologically, French c'est.
- 10) By this time it should be clear that "copulaless" is a relative, not absolute, term.

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